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SOC 4:06.2 UNDERCOVER

E. Howard Hunt: Heroics to Bedlam

Blunders

"UNDERCOVER: Memoirs of an American Secret Agent," by E. Howard Hunt (Berkley Publishing Corp./ G. P. Putnam's Sons, 329 pp., illustrated, $8.95).

Reviewed by Anthony Marro

E. Howard Hunt was standing in the waiting room outside Charles Colson's office, chatting with the secretaries and waiting to be ushered into the presence of the then-White House aide. Nixon's Irish setter, King Timahoe, bounded into the room, sniffed at Hunt and promptly lifted a leg. The former OSS operative, CIA agent and White House "plumber" jumped back, just managing to avoid—as he delicately phrased it—a stain on his trousers.

Besides reaffirming the opinion of those who considered King Timahoe to be one of the classier figures in the Nixon White House, the incident forces us to stop and consider: If Colson and the others had held Hunt in like regard, they probably would have saved themselves a great deal of embarrassment, not to mention grief. Instead, they chose to take him seriously, which is what Hunt is now asking us to do in this book.

For two years, Hunt has been portrayed in the press as something of a national joke—a man who in one lifetime managed to help engineer two national disasters, Watergate and the Bay of Pigs. But now he tells us that "because I have been depicted as at best a fumbler and at worst a pathological criminal, I am writing my personal record of events as I saw them develop, and so illuminate the truth of these events which, for all time must bear the scrutiny of history."

Since writing those lines, Hunt has admitted under oath (in the Watergate coverup trial) that this book, like his earlier grand jury testimony, is shot through with lies. So much for illumination and truth.

But this is not only a dishonest book, and a poorly written one at that. It also is a somewhat pathetic one, prepared by a man who is trying to escape the ridicule of the present by searching for heroics in his [illegible] past. It thus seems very important to him that the nation, and his children, know that he once fired at Japanese soldiers from along the Yellow River, slept with a Russian woman in Shanghai in 1945, was one of the nation's staunchest Cold Warriors, and shook hands with Ike in Montevideo. (The Russian woman, whose photograph he has thoughtfully provided, is described in the photo caption as "The beautiful Soviet agent Marusha Chernikov, with whom OSS operative Hunt had a brief affair . . ." Hunt was so proud of this that he allowed the publisher to tout it on the dust jacket. But the two paragraphs that he devotes to it in the manuscript say that it was her husband—not she—who was the Russian agent.)

We are told that Hunt—in his eyes—served his country in dangerous circumstances, and served it well, picking up lessons along the way that were to last him a lifetime. For example: "With regard to the discipline I learned at the Naval Academy, I remember very clearly the three possible answers accorded a midshipman or a junior naval officer: Yes, sir; No, sir; or No Excuse, sir. These replies formed part of the indoctrination that led to unquestioning obedience to orders, otherwise, no naval unit could function effectively in combat. My indoctrination was thorough and lasting."

If Hunt means to imply that his Naval Academy training caused him to snap to attention for G. Gordon Liddy some 30 years later, one has to wonder if he went from World War II to the Cold War without having heard about Nuremberg.

Liddy and Hunt are presented as men of action; men who knew how to get things done. What he refuses to admit is the reality that they were, in the end, bunglers—men who attempted a break-in of the Democratic National Committee with less planning than a junkie would give to a shoplifting at Macy's.

Hunt's book makes clear that he allowed the Cuban Watergate burglars to leave enough incriminating evidence back in their hotel rooms—address books, numbered bills, false ID cards and the like—to lead police right back to himself and to Liddy. He sent them into Lawrence O'Brien's office with no clear idea—apparently—of which phones they were supposed to tap. He sent them off with no cover story and no plans for a standby attorney to push bail [illegible] when everything went wrong. The first time they tried an entry it had to be scrapped; Hunt and one of the men got them-

Hunt relates all this with a straight face—managing to place the blame for the oversights and stupidities on others, especially James W. McCord Jr. And he tells the story in a prose that resembles silent-movie titles, heavy with melodrama and suspense. Thus he tells us that while the police were arresting the men inside Watergate, he drove his car within two blocks of the site—"within pistol range of the police cars, I reflected." He tells us that the next day, when a reporter phoned to ask him if he knew Barker, he felt "as though I were in the center of a vise whose jaws were beginning slowly but inexorably to close." And he tells us that he hadn't really wanted to ask Sirica for mercy after pleading guilty to the break-in but that "the fate and welfare of my motherless children took precedence over my . . . reluctance."

There is a great deal of self-pity in this book. Hunt manages to make four days in a disciplinary cell at the District of Columbia jail sound like Papillon's penal-colony stint. He refers to the Senate Watergate Committee and the press as "harassers."

But the real problem with this book is that it is dishonest. Three times in the final chapters Hunt protests that Nixon's men had destroyed notebooks that contained his defense—materials that would have shown that he was working on a project he believed to be authorized by the Attorney General. These materials, he now admits, never existed.

And he cries in outrage that Daniel Ellsberg went free while he said others were convicted for breaking into the office of his psychiatrist, protesting that "the team that sought his personal secrets was authorized to do so by high and competent government officials, including the President's chief domestic-affairs adviser, reacting to the largest raid on national security in . . . [U.S.] history."

That's what he says in his book. But he knows what it really was, and when it came time for him to go to jail and he was trying to get money and promises of clemency from the Nixon White House, he reminded Nixon's men what it was: "seamy," he said, and "clearly illegal."

Hunt's editors at Putnam knew that the book contained lies, but decided to go ahead and publish it anyway, touting it as the "eagerly awaited . . . exclusive life story of America's most famous career secret agent . . ." The 16 pages of photos are very much like the memoir itself; they show Hunt in heroic poses,